



**Light a Candle of Hope
Group Curriculum
December 4, 2016
Sermon Passage: Luke 2:15-20
Curriculum Passage: Isaiah 9:1-7**

Introduction

“Hope” is one of those common words that circulates throughout different seasons of our lives. Christmas is certainly one of those seasons in which “hope” frequently graces our conversations. There is an interesting dynamic with hope, though. If we think about it, hope is always inextricably linked with desperation. The stronger our sense of desperation, the greater our awareness of and need for hope. What is more, hope lies beyond our own abilities. If we were able to solve whatever the source of desperation is according to our own faculties, hope would be replaced with discipline and application.

In that sense, there could not be a better season to focus on hope than Christmas. Christmas is completely about recognizing that we are desperate for rescue from something that is both infinitely larger than us, but also intimately personal to us. Celebrating Christmas means acknowledging that we were lost in our transgressions, helpless to break free from the sin that entangles us, desperate to be freed by something far beyond ourselves.

Given the depth and severity of our need, it can seem somewhat strange that the source of our hope came as a child. However, as we look at our passage this week, we see that this child’s coming was foretold seven centuries before it even happened. In fact, this child’s coming was promised all the way back in Genesis 3. Our hope in Christ has always been God’s plan for curing our desperation and replacing it with peace. Our passage this week is found in Isaiah 9.

Biblical Background

The prophecy of Isaiah was predominately aimed at the southern kingdom, Judah, between the years 740 BC – 681 BC. These years spanned the reigns of four of Judah’s kings, according to the introduction in Isaiah 1:1. These kings vacillated between humble faithfulness to God in their early reigns to prideful, self-sufficient rebellion in the latter part of their lives. Ahaz and Hezekiah stand as the extremes. Ahaz’s reign was a spiritual atrocity of idol worship and rebellion against God. Hezekiah, on the other hand, was one of the greatest kings in Judah’s history. He was steadfastly reliant upon God for the leadership of His people, even in the direst of governmental circumstances. The variance in these four kings’ reigns paint the backdrop against which Isaiah carried out his prophetic ministry.

At the conclusion of Isaiah’s ministry, Judah is less than 100 years from their Babylonian exile. Given the patience of God with His people, that close proximity means that the people are already being warned of the coming judgment of God in the midst of their stiff-necked rebellion. For them, as we see in Isaiah 1, simply doing the right things, carrying out the right rituals, and doing so with extravagance was viewed as being pleasing to God. What Isaiah warns to the contrary is that ceremonial acts, no matter how grand, are repulsive to God if their purpose is to hide a heart with no regard for God’s glory.

The heart of Isaiah's prophecy, then, is God Himself. He is the center, the Sovereign, the Savior, and the only One deserving glorious worship. Inasmuch as the spiritual climate of Judah continued to deteriorate, the warning of judgment in the prophecy of Isaiah is tremendously warranted. However, even in the midst of the promise of coming judgment, Isaiah speaks words of hope, restoration, and salvation for the people of God that would ultimately repent and be restored to faithful fellowship with God. Our passage for this week occurs in the midst of one of those beautiful passages of hope for the coming restoration of God's people.

The Text

Chapters 9-11, which are a single unit, occur historically following an attack on Judah by the combined forces of Israel and Syria (Syro-Ephraimite War). Now Judah's foe, Assyria, is positioning itself to lay siege to Judah. In the midst of the constant threat of attack from other kingdoms, Judah is in the throes of a decision of monumental significance: Can God be trusted to protect His people? Or, should they seek alliances with other earthly kingdoms for their protection? That question will be answered differently by each of the four kings that Isaiah served in conjunction with – most notably Hezekiah. The issue that underlies the questions, however, is always the same – the importance of a good and righteous ruling king. With that in mind, Isaiah 9 speaks volumes about the coming fulfillment of God's promises to His people.

“But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.” (Isaiah 9:1)

This passage, historically, would have been recorded during the reign of King Ahaz, the most wicked of the four kings. The gloom and anguish would be appropriate descriptors for all of the turmoil and darkness of Ahaz's reign. The close of chapter 8 details the fate of those whose hearts are hardened toward God, even in the face of harsh judgment. That fate is filled with despair, contempt, and hopelessness. So, with the beginning of chapter 9, Isaiah marks the great difference between those with hardened hearts and those of the repentant remnant of God's people.

Opening the verse the word *“But”* marks a strong adversative in the Hebrew text. Whatever the condition of 8:22 was, what is coming next is of a completely different character. In conjunction with the next sentence referencing the *“former time,”* Isaiah makes a sharp distinction between two different seasons in the life of God's people. Interestingly, the area that Isaiah refers to, Zebulun and Naphtali, would have been in the far northern corner of Israel, not Judah. These lands were the most militarily oppressed and most corrupted by pagan worship of all the lands of the northern kingdom. It is likely that, though he primarily speaks to Judah, Isaiah references this region of Israel to demonstrate the restoration and transformation that will come about in this new era under God's sovereign timing.

Adding to this alarming mentioning of Israel, who had just sought to destroy Judah, Isaiah refers to the area of Galilee as *“Galilee of the nations.”* The *“nations”* is synonymous with *“Gentiles.”* It is as though Isaiah is specifically seeking to exceed his audience's perceived

limits of who God can bless, change, transform, and use. There is no limit to God's reach; nothing is off limits to Him because He made it all.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." (Isaiah 9:2)

Verse 2 begins a poetic section that closely resembles the form of ancient royal birth announcements. This is tremendously important, considering the promised coming of a son named Immanuel in Isaiah 7. Scholar Gary V. Smith notes that in other birth announcement passages in Scripture, "a difficult situation is described, the birth is announced, the name is declared, and an explanation of the name or the role of the child is explained. This...fits the joyous occasion of a special royal birth." In that regard, chapter 7's introduction of Immanuel and the verses in our passage seem to work in tandem to both introduce the name of the child and his grand role in God's redemptive work among His people.

Verse 2, then, begins by contrasting those who had formerly walked in darkness with their new reality after the grace of God is shown upon them. Walking is a metaphorical descriptor that refers to that which characterizes someone's life. Walking in darkness, then, means those whose lives were completely defined by and inundated with all manner of sin and rebellion. There is a helplessness to such a description in that those people who walked in darkness were powerless to free themselves from their bondage to sin. They could not remove the albatross from around their own necks, so to speak. The description reeks of despair and hopelessness.

When the enshrouding of darkness seems to smother those who walk in it, finally deliverance comes! They see a great light, letting them know that God has not forgotten them in spite of their rebellion. Despite their best attempts to destroy themselves through the worship of false gods, the trusting of earthly allies, and the general refusal to remain in covenant with the Covenant-maker, a light shines on them. There is hope for those who are hopeless!

"You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with the joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire." (Isaiah 9:3-5)

These three verses are a compact, dense series of metaphors to describe the joy coming to the people of God. Isaiah begins by describing the nation as thriving and full of joy, recalling the iconic reign of King David that was bountiful to the point of being world-renowned. To give concrete examples of what the coming joy would be like, Isaiah describes an abundant harvest combined with the scene when victorious soldiers return home from battle with great plunder.

In mentioning the dividing of plunder, Isaiah continues the military theme as he describes the reason the coming joy will be possible. There is no sense whatsoever that this coming joy will be a simple dismissal of the rebellious lives of God's people. Instead, the joy will

come only when the oppressor of God's people is destroyed. Speaking immediately of the Assyrian persecutors, Isaiah describes three instruments used by the Assyrians to force prisoners of war and captives into manual labor: yokes, staffs, and rods.

Those instruments of notable oppression will be ultimately shattered by God. Isaiah chooses to liken the event to the defeat of Midian by the army of Gideon in Judges. The defeat of Midian had little to do with Gideon and his army, other than obedient participation. God defeated Midian as their army slept, utilizing an untrained Israelite military that was fatally disproportionate to the size of the Midianite army. The weapons of victory were not swords and spears, but jars, trumpets, and torches. The only explanation for the success of such an unconventional battle by worldly standards is that the real power in the battle exceeded worldly power. Just as God defeated the oppressor of His people in a way only He could through Gideon, He would, once again, defeat His people's oppressor in a way that only He could. That way, though explained in terms of military conquest here, would come through an unexpected source.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6)

The manner in which hope of deliverance would come was a child. If the poetic form did not adhere so closely to a royal birth announcement, then the Promised Deliverer being a child would be quite alarming. In this context, though, the child is promised to be a great ruler as God's gift to His people. The "given" language is crucial to the understanding of what Isaiah is prophesying. This child is no coincidence or just another gifted leader. The child is God's chosen, perfect gift that His people so greatly need. As a way of demonstrating the perfection of God's gift, Isaiah describes the child with descriptive names.

"Wonderful Counselor" combines two functions. Where "wonderful" in our modern context has been reduced to something that is simply really good, the idea behind this adjective is that of the extraordinarily miraculous. The miraculous acts of God that will be demonstrated through this chosen instrument of deliverance and hope will occur in the area of wise guidance, decision-making, and planning. The child would become a supernaturally wise and prudent leader of God's people.

"Mighty God" is the second of the two-part names. What is particularly important about this name is that the name contains a name of God within it (El Gibbor). "El," meaning "God," links this child to the One who is sending him. To prophetically reveal that the child would have a share of God's name is to say that he would be divine himself. They are of the same family, so to speak. Isaiah later uses this same name to describe God Himself in Isaiah 10:21. This child, then, is a holy and divine warrior on behalf of His people that would vanquish the oppressors and set God's people free.

"Everlasting Father" is actually only one word in Hebrew that contains both of these concepts. As it pertains to the king that this child would become, the everlasting nature of his reign hearkens the reader back to God's promise to King David that he would always

have a descendant on the throne of God's people. As a father, the child will combine a paternal, compassionate love for his children with the authoritative warrior persona of kingship.

"Prince of Peace" is perhaps the most familiar of the four names. While every king longs to provide peace and prosperity for their kingdom, the name Prince of Peace implies that the peace that is coming is under the sovereign control of the king. The peace that is coming is a permanent end of war in which God's people will experience rest, tranquility, and harmony.

"Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." (Isaiah 9:7)

Equal to the four names of the child that will become a king, Isaiah now lists four qualities of his reign. First, his government and the peace that characterizes it will never end. It will continue to increase until the king's influence encompasses everything in existence. No one will be capable of defeating him or his work to bring peace. Second, his kingdom is a fulfillment of God's covenant with King David. Third, the king's rule will be based upon justice and righteousness. This is in sharp contrast with the character of the reign of Ahaz in Isaiah's immediate context. However, it is also in utter contradiction to the qualities of any human being's rule. This justice and righteousness is ultimately devoid of selfishness, sin, or shadow. Fourth, what will ultimately accomplish the promise of this coming hope is the unwavering passion and zeal of God. He Himself will do this and, therefore, it cannot fail. It cannot go unachieved. It cannot change as though God were capricious.

This passage of hope that appears 700 years before the birth of Christ is the revelation of God to His people, assuring them that, while they have trampled underfoot their end of the covenant times beyond number, God never forgets His promises to His people. The peace, rest, and blessing of God that were promises of God's people living in the land that He gave them would still come to pass because God's promises never fail. Despite all of the darkness and depravity of the age, Isaiah's prophecy reminded God's people that hope is assured, deliverance is coming, and restoration is guaranteed.

The Text in Life

The Christmas season always carries with it the heightened expectations of an increase in the season's virtues. As we listen to carols, decorate trees, attend Christmas parties, and enjoy all of the other festivities that accompany the season's celebration, there is an implicit expectation for more cheer, more peace, more hope, and more goodwill toward men. Frequently, however, those expectations go unmet amid the insanity and busyness of making Christmas happen.

The hope of Christmas is the same hope that Isaiah spoke of to a people that desperately needed hope – even if they were resistant to it. There are many points of application for this text. For us, though, as we enter into the Christmas season proper (meaning post-Thanksgiving), here are some important things to bear in mind.

First, only Christ can provide the hope that our souls long for. In Isaiah's context, the people looked to other kings to provide hope and peace for them. In our context, we look at other people, our relationships with them, our jobs, our children, our investments, and a whole host of other things to provide hope and deliverance from the darkness of our world. The truth is still the same, though: only Christ can provide the hope for a life put right, filled with righteousness and justice, kindness and mercy, peace and harmony. Looking for those things while placing confidence in any other entity will only bring disillusionment, pain, and frustration.

Second, people around us still need to know about the hope of Christ, even if others resist. The astounding thing about Isaiah is that he knew (because God told him) that most of the people that he shared God's revelation with were going to reject him anyway. Their hardness of heart made them resistant to anything having to do with God. They were self-assured, self-reliant, and all those other "self" descriptors that made them convinced they didn't need God. Sounds an awful lot like the world around us today as well. Still, Isaiah knew that he must speak of the truth of God's faithfulness, the hope that He offers in the face of the harshest, darkest season, and the restoration He offers to His people. Again, not much has changed. We also must speak of the glory of what Christmas is, the hope that it celebrates, the restoration it commemorates, and the darkness it eradicates because Christ came into the world.

Third, just like Isaiah prophesied so long ago, the assurance of hope in our lives is unwavering because it is God who does it. Discouragement will be a part of our lives in seasons until Jesus returns. Sometimes the darkness of humanity will seem overwhelming. There will be days in which loneliness, bitterness, and resentment seem to fight against every holy thought we have. That is, unfortunately, part of living in a world that is marred with sin. But, "the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." His hope is everlasting, reaches to depths that sin cannot, heals completely, restores faithfully, and assures us that God will never leave us or forsake us. That's what Christmas is. We could not get to God, so God came to us. We did not desire God, so God drew us to Himself. We were lost in darkness, so God gave us light. This is the hope of Christmas.

Discussion Questions

1. What evidences do you notice that indicate an increased expectation of hope, peace, love, and goodwill at Christmas – even among unbelievers?
2. When Isaiah speaks of the darkness and gloom of the land at the opening of chapter 9, what immediately springs to mind about the world we live in?
3. Describe what having hope means to you. How do you respond in situations when you feel hopeless?
4. Which one of the four names that Isaiah ascribes to the child resonates most with you? What about your life in this season do you think makes that name resonate so deeply?
5. How would you describe what "the zeal of the LORD" is?
6. Isaiah is clear that the faithfulness of God is not dependent on the faithfulness of His people. How does that shape your understanding of hope?